



A Seat at the Table

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Union Noel Bowler

Introduction

There are strong and complex currents in the Irish Sea. Between England, where Noel Bowler now works and his native Ireland, there are pulls and rips that come from North and South, to wrestle at the foot of the Isle of Man. They can tip the most mature seafarers into states of contrition. Such strong and hidden flows can alter the course of lives in a moment, arriving as cold and dispassionate as sudden winter showers or as unannounced and final as a redundancy letter on a spring Friday morning. They serve as a reminder that the forces that shape our lives -whilst not always apparent or announced- are real, nevertheless- and all about us.

On the face of it, the ample tides that challenge navigation might seem remote from the vacant, extended table that dominates the *Seafarers Union* meeting room in Baltimore, Maryland. Noel Bowler has photographed the room as if set for parliament. It's a balanced space, ready for close and equal debate. The table brings to mind the hull of a ship –or, more accurately, as chairs rise bonelike on each side of a polished wooden surface, it echoes the skeletal jig of a vessel in early construction, taking its shape...a future promised, if not yet wholly assured.

It's a quiet photograph, as many are in the series Noel Bowler has made over the last decade in the Union buildings across Europe and America. Often un-peopled, they are dormant chambers, laid out ahead of debate. Whilst some rooms are novel and singular, others seem mundane, as workspaces can be- clerical spaces, where advice is taken, mediation served and strategy shaped. If Bowler had kept closer counsel with the historical etiquette around how labour and the Union movement has been photographed over the last century, he might have felt compelled to echo the majesty of industrial construction in process - he could have aligned himself with the press-pack, to chase the physical flash-points of toe-to-toe disputes and their eventual bruised resolution. He might have resolved to witness deals as they were struck –or stalemates as they extend...but a dust has settled on those records of labour. Economists are already heralding a third industrial revolution, a digital hybrid of manufacturing and service bases. But how will that look -and where are those workers who will populate these new markets?

In truth, there have always been economic revision and artists have rarely been slow to respond to new flows or tensions. Recent decades have proved no exception. Coco Fusco's early 1990s appreciation of the Mexican workers who manufactured parts for household computers - a presentation that concussed an academic conference on 'new media' (-whatever that was...) by reminding delegates of what, or *who*, really mattered, predated the late Stuart Hall's conversation with David Harvey, in Isaac Julien's film *Kapital* – most recently screened as part of Okwui Enwezor's 2015 Venice Biennale keynote show and which included Hall's haunting question: 'How are we to understand the Class War in the 21st Century?' We're witnessing the latest consolidation of work itself and all that's affected by such changes, the inevitable shifts at the heart of family, stability, nourishment and community. New initiatives arrive, of course, lured through incentives and promises, only to depart when the currency chokes profit. Attuned to the hard-edged logic of business, we might not be moved to dwell on such states of transition any more- until a company relocates and takes the hope and distractions it brought for

regeneration with it, or until a remote building collapses around textile workers in Bangladesh, drawing into focus the thin and hardly regulated strands that keep Western chain stores tied to their profits, as both profit and transparency are temporarily compromised. Communities that once made something - or mined something- may no longer work those regular shifts before returning to the homes built close by, to convenience that very purpose. Regions are changing to take roles between manufacture, service and heritage and are compelled to engage with the inevitable impermanence and restructure that follows.

We're slowly becoming naturalized to such instabilities and the rhetoric that attends them. We're wary of neat answers, we grow tired of politics and promises and seem to have grown distracted by interests close to home. We focus closely and dwell on our own lives now, photographing at the slip of a wrist -because photography is everywhere, ubiquitous, though often forgettable. Our communities are as virtual as they were once external, we can be preoccupied now with looking *in* instead of looking *after* – we're fluent yet fearful, educated yet uncertain, with a tendency to pull close, in ever smaller circles of trust and cooperation. We're more conscious of, it would seem—if no more ready for, or resistant to- subterfuge, in all its forms.

The persuasions that vie to control the message at the heart of working life have long lost their openness, their naivety –if naïve is what they ever truly were- and photographers, we might understand, have had to negotiate such a world and make sense of it accordingly. Just as the reporting of conflict has become so managed in recent decades, a more interpretive 'late' photography has emerged. It counterbalances the medium's relationship with the observer and outlived a recent dalliance with vernacular, faux-subjective practices, to return to architectural stillness. It's willfully slow and considered, often working outside the immediate field of engagement, drawing instead upon preparation or consequence, ephemera and evidence –it's a kind of photography that draws from archaeology, aspiring to reach tensions beyond the surface and assess the fragments through multi-vocal enquiry. We've reached an oblique and mixed up moment in the medium's development. On the one hand, it can draw on the contemporary possibilities of scale and reproduction whilst remaining reserved and artisanal – indebted, as it seems to be, to the measured clarity of early modernism. Drawing from photography's slow and peerless contract with time, it can sensitize the most subdued locations before asking us -should we ever have the time to pause awhile in this brisk world- to think, not just about what's going on...but about fate.

Noel Bowler's photography has followed a steady migration to the still interiors he now records. In the early years of the new century he made a long-term study of Mountjoy prison in Dublin. There is warmth and cooperation in the pictures he made with prisoners. He's accepted, trusted and there's a sense of engagement and humility as he photographs at knee-touching distance. In one photograph, a prisoner sits waiting for a visitor. His age is hard to define, his appearance inflected with the fluorescent light and the pallor of prison time. The photograph is an aching and affecting admission of human fallibility -made all the more human against the stale, cream brick room the encounter will take place in. In subsequent work, and perhaps influenced by the Irish photographers Donovan Wylie and Paul Seawright, with whom Bowler studied and later taught in Belfast, the interior itself came to dominate. How a space can betray something of those who would normally populate

it has been a contention throughout Photography's history. From its earliest moments, the limits of the medium's sensitivity meant that descriptions of working life -and working peoples homes- remained rare in 19th Century practice. These absences were bridged but not wholly filled by pictures made to mark workers holidays, mass celebrations and occasional leisure interests -events (we might note) recorded by those who had the means and liberty to photograph. In 1936, Walker Evans photograph of the Burroughs family bedroom would work to cantilever splintering austerity with a sense of the ordered integrity of the working family who slept there. In spite of their absence, it would seem, lives can be laid bare. In the series *Making Space*, Bowler went on to photograph rooms used for Muslim prayer in Ireland. Now architecturally precise, the photographs would render the modest adaption of unorthodox spaces into places fit for prayer with a mature, refined economy.

...but what of the people? They remain of course, living, working, praying, keeping on. In Noel Bowler's latest photographs, Union workers are often represented through their rooms and the materials they gather, as they negotiate the institutional spaces they are the latest custodians of: A paper cutting of Marx is pinned next to campaign flyers and personal details on a desk partition in a Dublin *SIPTU* office. It's a mood board, of sorts, with tokens built over time, serving to shield and insulate as much as they are a reminder of purpose, belief and family matters. In Pittsburgh, a telephone is the only modern concession in the antique, wood-warm office of the *United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America*. A room with a view, it boasts an elevated authority over a city and the Stadium it sits adjacent to. With height comes knowledge, status... power... *there is, still, as the song goes, power in a Union.*

Power now rarely manifests as a binary tension that positions a factory owner's pay offer against a community's rejection song. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, some theorists would rekindle and reflect on Antonio Gramsci's prison writings, particularly the theory of *hegemony* -by which control can be imposed without a public ever fully recognizing the coercion at its heart. In dismantling regional identities, by forwarding a sense of the single, family unit as the value that should be protected beyond all else, years of decline in community cohesion across the international industrial landscape would progress. Historians and writers interested in photography would return to the texts of William Stott and, later, Jeremy Seabrook, to ask: 'is it be possible to photograph a condition -something as much a psychological state as a direct action or a mark on a surface?' Surely, they would contend, those photographs that recorded the ship's launch or the factory outing only ever amounted to a partial account, more an irregular note in a workforce's year than a more sustained heartbeat?

Photography, once a witness, has become an interpreter, as it relates a world so conscious of the currency of its own image and anxious to drive agendas on its own terms. In Jaqueline Hassink's *Table of Power*, a book in which the Dutch photographer attempted to photograph the unpopulated boardrooms of successful multinational companies, her contention -that we might understand something of the mindset of the companies themselves by looking at the spaces where the most telling decisions are made - was all the more effecting on the occasions when her access was denied. The refusal was duly noted in her book by blank pages. How nervous those companies must have been of photography's ability to glean traces of policy,

philosophy or even character from the fabric of a vacant room. Whilst Bowler's presence is more philosophically aligned to the work carried out in these rooms, his approach might also move us to recall the photographs of Lynne Cohen and Lucinda Devlin, who, amongst others, began to explore the institutional interior in the 1970s and beyond -work spaces that commanded the reverence of church interiors or the suspicion of courthouses. Their interior geographies allowed us to imagine and invest –to consider the impact of decisions made in those spaces on lives that, for a few moments, disheveled them of their institutional neatness. These were still and sometimes graceless rooms, where money was made and spent, where knowledge was taught, where sentences were passed...where wars were strategized. Rarely benign, such interiors could be benevolent or instructive, fateful or final.

Against such foundations, Bowler's carefully rendered scenes -and the representatives he occasionally portrays- are at the heart of a movement that works for the just representation of working people. Whilst some organizations occupy the simplest of functional spaces, others confidently demonstrate their rootedness within the established order of things—with some owning, as they do, significant real estate at the heart of their country's political geography. The *ZNP Union of Polish Teachers* will convene in what is, in every sense, a classroom, for example, whilst, at *The Brotherhood of Teamsters* in Washington DC (-where even the chairs huddle in conference) the only distractions from the business at hand are hanging portraits of esteemed former members and the clearest view of Capitol Hill, the heart of America's political system, just a stone's throw across the park.

Throughout the seasons when parliaments are in session, TV political debate programmes often run late into the evenings. When what used to be known as the working week nears its end, when tiredness overtakes composure and the risk of practiced speakers falling off-message becomes a real possibility, the power play between politicians, journalists and Union leaders can often become a breathless battle for hearts and minds. It's rehearsed, yet fragile and faltering. It can be blindly partisan and self-absorbed. Answers will evade questions and, in turn, become accusations. Figures are cited and traded, manipulated and returned, to finally mean nothing as panelists trade jowl- or pinch- faced jousts before braying audiences. The political representatives, it would seem, have all too often become a distant and scripted deflection...there are few real answers.

There are, however, on those late evenings spent channel-hopping for hope, rare moments that can sound startling notes of integrity. When just one decision can break apart a family, a workforce...a region, those who speak as Union representatives seem charged with the most urgent task of code-breaking, translating the doublespeak to hold practiced opponents to account, through a few brief seconds of principled and dignified resistance. Such reason has been shaped and refined in the rooms we are introduced to here. As I look at these pictures, recognizing Mark Serwotka and the late Bob Crow (who, in their time, have been regular spokesmen -and no strangers to political debate and its wounding personal hostility), I'm reminded of those late night arguments and anticipate the battles still to come -and I think Noel Bowler does too. He's dwelt on the rooms where decisions are made, where arguments are resolved and cases assigned. He's recorded the spaces set to plan for over-turning waves of apathy and the decades of

attrition that those organizations that speak for labour practices have encountered and weathered. When responses to the slippery world of false front and favour are negotiated as on a sea yet to reveal its worst swells, it's heartening to spend time with Bowler's quietly anchored work, to recognize the value and richness of all these sustained labours and understand that there are still sharp minds and strong hands ready to navigate difficult waters.

Ken Grant
June 1 2015